

The Week

ANTONIO MACCANICO, a 71-year-old former bureaucrat, has been asked to form a broadly-based government in Italy with a brief to keep the country ticking over while politicians try to agree on reforming the constitution.

THE United States has given a grant of \$2 million in humanitarian assistance to communist North Korea which, according to the Clinton administration, is experiencing widespread food shortages and malnutrition.

RUSSIAN union leaders called off their pit strike at the weekend after the government promised \$125 million in back pay and a \$2.25 billion subsidy for the industry. *Washington Post*, page 13

CONFUSION reigned in Guatemala after the government said a man was shot dead as he tried to kill President Alvaro Arzu on the eve of Pope John Paul's visit.

THE GREEK government, facing public indignation at Washington's role in defusing the row with Turkey over a disputed Aegean island, forced the US assistant secretary of state, Richard Holbrooke, to cancel his forthcoming visit. *Le Monde*, page 17

CLAUDE GUBLER, the Paris doctor who breached state secrecy by writing a book about President François Mitterrand's health record, may be struck off by the French Medical Association.

TAJKIK government troops pushed back a riotous army force that had advanced towards the capital, Dushanbe, to press demands for the dismissal of the government of the central Asian former Soviet republic.

SHOPS and markets in the Guinean capital Conakry were bare on Sunday after a frenzy of looting by riotous soldiers demanding better pay and rations. Up to 40 people were killed and dozens wounded in the looting and clashes between the mutineers and troops.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL said it received many reports in the last 10 months of German police beating up detained foreigners, and demanding an investigation.

NIGERIAN and Cameroonian troops fought on disputed islands in the Bakassi peninsula and several soldiers were killed on both sides.

THE United Nations secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, warned that an unprecedented cash crisis could shut down the organisation. *Washington Post*, page 13



Words of wisdom... A man studies the Koran in the 1,000-year-old Azhar mosque in Cairo before breaking his fast at sunset during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan

PHOTOGRAPH: MOHAMED EL-DAN/HANNAH

Kohl warns Britain on Europe's future

John Palmer in Brussels
Larry Elliott in Davos
and Michael White

CHANCELLOR Helmut Kohl issued a veiled warning to the British government last week that it should not try to deflect other European Union countries from moving ahead to monetary and closer political union. His remarks will be seen as a direct rebuke to senior British figures, including the former Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, who have asked Germany to propose postponing the planned move to a single currency in 1999. In an address at Louvain University near Brussels, the German chancellor served notice that the pace of European integration would not be set by those who wanted to slow progress to closer union. Mr Kohl said the single currency project was going through "a period of uncertainty" but he insisted that "the policy of European integration actually comes down to a question of peace or war for the 21st century". He stressed that "it is no use following the ostrich policy."

The chancellor did not mention the British government by name, but it was clear whom he had in mind. "During the next few years we will have to prove that a viable Europe can be built with 15 and more states," he said. "The slowest ship in the convoy should not be allowed to determine its speed. If individual partners are not prepared or able to participate in certain steps towards integration, the others should not be denied the opportunity to move forward." At the weekend, Jacques Santer, president of the European Commission, upped the stakes by bracketing the single market with the achievement of monetary union by 1999. "We will spare no effort to see that it is achieved. But if it isn't, it will be a great step backwards, and I don't know whether the single market would suffer such a blow." Sir Leon Brittan, the EC vice-president, strove on Sunday to

SA school in court for barring blacks

David Beresford
in Johannesburg

A PROVINCIAL government in South Africa is due to take a local primary school to court this week to force it to admit three black children under the country's non-racial constitution. The Northern Province announced last week that it would be lodging an urgent application with the supreme court for an order forcing the all-white Potgietersrus primary school to open its door to blacks. The move came after parents of children at the school voted to defy the government on the issue.

"We want the court to rule that the school's action is unconstitutional and that they have to admit blacks," said a spokesman for the provincial administration, Jake Mokobi.

A confrontation between parents and the regional government blew up last month when a group of parents wearing the khaki dress of rightwing organisations blocked the school entrance to stop a father delivering his three children.

"God warns us in the Bible about mixing races," a local newspaper quoted a parent as saying. "Under no circumstances will my children mix with blacks."

But Danie Bisschoff, a lawyer representing the school, insisted that the black children were only refused admission because of a shortage of space. "The black kids are not the issue," he said. "The school couldn't allow white kids in either because there just isn't room."

But the government spokesman insisted there was room for the three black children. "It's a disguise for crude racism," he said. "The extra-parliamentary Conservative party, which is strong in the area, is attempting to exploit the clash. It described the incident as a 'new awakening by Afrikaners' and appealing to whites elsewhere to 'emulate the courage' of the Potgietersrus parents and 'follow the same path of resistance'."

Greece gets back piece of history

Helena Smith
in Athens

GREECE is poised to renew its campaign to retrieve the Elgin Marbles after succeeding in getting a hoard of priceless Mycenaean treasures repatriated from the United States.

This small piece of Greek history arrived back at the weekend, after years of "blood curdling" adventure, according to Greece's new culture minister, Stavros Benos. "This is a major triumph, not only for Greece, but for all countries seeking the return of cultural property," he said.

Few Greeks have heard of the stolen Aloada Treasures, but their return from Washington is due to be marked this week. No pomp will be spared as the collection of rare and ancient gold jewellery and ornaments is welcomed in the capital.

Mr Benos, who has assumed the post most famously held by the late actress Melina Mercouri, will have "Elgin's loot" uppermost on his mind as he presides over the fanfare.

"The return of these wonderful pieces will most certainly strengthen our demand for the Parthenon marbles," Mr Benos said. "It shows that Melina's dream, which everyone thought utopian, can be realised. We will get the marbles back from the British Museum."

Mr Benos has none of Mercouri's fiery passion or glamour. But like his friend and predecessor, he has made the repatriation of the 750-long, fifth century frieze, metopes and figures a personal "mission".

"The days of 'no, no, no' are over," said Eleni Cubilt of the London-based British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon marbles. "Even those who were opposed to their return now realise the arguments they used are no longer valid."

The repatriation of the Mycenaean treasures, which include ornate rings, necklaces, glass beads and sealstones, ends nearly two decades of thievary, crooked art deals and unprecedented legal action.

Birthplace of Buddhism's founder traced to Nepal

John Ezard

BUDDHISM'S counterpart to Christ's stable has been discovered in south-west Nepal, an international team of archaeologists announced on Monday.

They said a stone buried on a platform of bricks 5m under a temple marked the place where Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born 2,600 years ago.

The team said the relics were under the Mayadevi temple in Lumbini, 300km south-west of Kathmandu. The platform dated from the era of Emperor Ashoka, who ruled much of the sub-continent.

The archaeologists — from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Japan — said they made the discovery nine months ago, but the government delayed making an announcement until

it had finished consulting experts. Some scholars claim the Buddha was born in northern India. But the prime minister of Nepal, Sher Bahadur Deuba, said the identification was reliable. "The discovery proves that Lord Buddha was born at this sacred place." Buddhist literature says the Buddha's mother, Queen Mahamaya, dreamt in 623BC that "a white elephant, beautiful as silver" entered her womb through her side. On her way to her parents' home, she passed through what was then the park of Lumbini. She went into labour, bathed in a sacred pond and walked 25 paces to give birth. According to this account, Emperor Ashoka placed a stone on bricks at the birthplace, and a pillar which still stands.

Iraqis celebrate in advance of UN oil talks

David Hirst

IRAQIS were queuing in Baghdad last week desperate to sell hoarded dollars and buy dinars, as the national currency staged a spectacular rise and the cost of food plunged.

Bank employees said they were collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars every day. Their reserves of hard currency have never been as high since coffers started emptying under pressure from United Nations sanctions, imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Some people queued all day but were unable to exchange their dollars, as banks ran short of dinars.

For ordinary Iraqis, the turnaround is the most sustained and dramatic in the bleak era that began with the Gulf war.

The Iraqi currency's spectacular recovery began after Baghdad agreed to enter talks with the UN on selling limited amounts of oil to buy urgently needed food and medicines. The talks were to begin this week.

Under UN resolution 986, Baghdad is entitled to sell \$1 billion worth of oil every three months for buying food and medicine to be distributed to the people under UN supervision.

President Saddam Hussein had been considering this for some time, after arguing for years that supervised oil sales were an infringement of sovereignty.

When he solemnly announced the oil-for-food talks to the people — on January 20 — the effect was immediate. Celebratory gunfire echoed around Baghdad and, by the end of the day, the currency was rising. Instead of costing 2,620 dinars to buy \$1, it cost 2,000. By last week, the official rate was 800 and strengthening.

Last month, in the wake of the announcement, joyful people descended in such numbers on the Shorja souk, Baghdad's traditional food market, that traffic came to a standstill. Musicians struck up, and the crowds danced as women handed out pastries.

"Thank God," said an old man in tears. "We are going to eat again, and all will go back to what it was."

The value of the dinar is the chief yardstick of Iraq's fortunes. Before the Gulf war, one dinar fetched \$3.20. It is still far from that, but is now 300 per cent stronger than before President Saddam announced the talks. Prices of food and basic commodities, such as rice, vegetable oil and sugar, have fallen by up to 50 per cent. This is true bounty in a country where a civil servant's entire official salary buys 24 eggs.

The strategy of hope carries high risks for President Saddam. The negotiations will be fraught with political and technical difficulties and there is no guarantee that the UN deal will go through.

If agreement is reached, that will almost certainly strengthen the Iraqi leader in the short term. The celebrations "proved that". But the longer term is different.

"I think the people will start demanding more and more, and the Americans will capitalise on this to wring more and more concessions from him," an Iraqi exile said. "In any case, it is hard for him not to accept now. Can you imagine the people's reaction if prices jumped again to where they were — and probably much higher still?"

Jailed Ogonis plead for help

Chris McGreal
in Port Harcourt

NINETEEN Ogonis facing trial and the gallows for allegedly participating in the same murders for which Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other men were hanged in November have smuggled a letter out of prison pleading for the Commonwealth to secure their freedom.

The appeal, headed "SOS" and signed by all 19 men, is addressed to a Commonwealth ministerial delegation appointed to urge Nigeria's military regime to restore democracy and respect human rights.

"We are hereby calling on you all, through your offices and humanness, come quickly to our aid and

save our lives — cause our freedom, for we have suffered a lot," says the letter, handwritten on a page torn from an exercise book.

The 19 Ogonis are held in harsh conditions at Port Harcourt prison. They are split between severely overcrowded cells, each with dozens of inmates. All sleep on the floor. They are let out for a few minutes each morning to wash from a bucket in a neighbouring field. Family visits are allowed once a month, but are more frequent if bribes are paid. Payment is also expected for food. Malnourishment and disease are common among the prison population.

"We are grossly underfed coup-

led with the complete lack of medical care. As a result we are becoming malnourished and anaemic. These conditions have contributed to the death of one of us," the letter said. Clement Tuisima died last August from untreated diabetes, according to Amnesty International. The mechanic, aged 40, was taken briefly to hospital and chained to the bed, but he was returned to prison where he died.

Lawyers say the men's best hope is that the regime will not risk further international condemnation and will put the trial on hold indefinitely. Meanwhile, posters threatening the life of the exiled Nigerian Nobel literature prize winner, Wole Soyinka, have been plastered across Lagos two days after a government minister implicated him in bomb attacks.

The posters, signed by "committed patriots", denounce opponents of the country's military dictator, General Sani Abacha, including the National Liberation Council of Nigeria (NALICO) led by Professor Soyinka.

The threats come amid rising paranoia within the regime since the recent death of Gen Abacha's son in a presidential plane crash, and bomb explosions in the northern cities of Kano and Kaduna. Lawyers say the men's best hope is that the regime will not risk further international condemnation and will put the trial on hold indefinitely. Meanwhile, posters threatening the life of the exiled Nigerian Nobel literature prize winner, Wole Soyinka, have been plastered across Lagos two days after a government minister implicated him in bomb attacks.

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John Ezard

Rebel who broke audience sound barrier

Jacques-Emmanuel Fousnaquer reassesses the Franco-American composer Edgard Varèse

ON DECEMBER 2, 1954, Hermann Scherchen conducted what turned out to be a legendary first performance of Edgard Varèse's Déserts. It was the first time French radio broadcast a concert in stereo. The radio announcer was 29-year-old Pierre Boulez.



The beginning of the performance passed without incident, but at the point in the composition when the orchestra fell quiet and was replaced by an electro-acoustic tape, all hell broke loose. Within 15 minutes the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées had been turned into a battlefield. Nothing like it had happened since the first performance of Igor Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps 41 years earlier.

enthusiastic reception from Richard Strauss. Other early works, including Oedipus und die Sphinx, an opera based on a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, were destroyed by fire in Berlin, where he had left them in store before emigrating to New York in 1915. He took out American citizenship in 1927, but a year later returned to Paris.

tion, he worked with Xenakis, who is probably the only living composer to have been deeply influenced by him. A lesser-known aspect of Varèse is his interest in jazz. Few are aware, for instance, that Charlie Parker, shortly before his death, sought out Varèse in the hope of taking lessons from him, or that the jazz flautist Eric Dolphy performed in his Denise 21.3.

Most of the material, however, belongs to Chou Wen-Chung, the Chinese-American musician — and disciple of Varèse — who on the composer's death was put in charge of looking after his archives and supervising performances of his works. He also completed Varèse's last major composition, Nocturnal.

Duets for Saraswati

Catherine Bédarida in Delhi

THE Delhi-based classical Indian singers Rajan and Sajan Misra have been performing together since their childhood, which they spent in Varanasi, a centre of religious, classical and popular song.

The brothers live under the same roof with their families, and they teach their three children how to sing. During the day they also receive pupils, some of whom pay no fee, as is required by tradition.



Classical Indian repertoire has no written scores. It is passed on orally, which explains why the teaching process is so important. When the princely patrons disappeared, schools took their place and government grants were set up to help pupils from less well-off families.

remarkable woman dancer who was also present at Avignon, teaches the subtleties of odissi, one of the seven classical styles. Her brother Madhup trains male and female singers separately. The top floor is given over to the teaching of three important instruments used in Indian music: the sitar, the tabla and the flute.

People can hear the great performers thanks to recording companies like Music Today, which was set up in 1990 by the weekly India Today and sells its products either by mail order or through small outlets such as tobacconists and village bazaars.

"easy listening" — "romantic" or relaxing music, or compositions using synthesizers on top of real instruments. "It's India's New Age," says Anand Prasad, head of Music Today.

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Seeking sisters with a habit of silence

THE NEIGHBOURS do not complain. The people in the house next door are very quiet; in fact, they're silent. In the heart of Chester, at 10 Curzon Park South, stands a Benedictine abbey.

productive. Only two qualifications are necessary for this life of holy contemplation — the ability to be silent and to pray. The nuns brought their abbey to suburbia seven years ago, after falling numbers and rising costs meant they could no longer afford their spacious premises overlooking the sea off the north Wales coast.

blowing of cold noses under winter skies and the distant rumble of sales executives driving past. With a few exceptions such as the singing of offices, life is conducted in silence. By modern terms it is also unproductive.

Notes & Queries Joseph Harker

WHAT IS it that makes a song catchy?

THE ANSWER, my friend, is blowing in the wind. — Sheila Dikko, Lagos, Nigeria

RONALD J GRETZ in Music. Language And Fundamentals, says a good melody is "the right combination of rhythm, meter and pitch". What more needs to be said? — Robin Bajer, Vancouver, Canada

WHAT phenomena might one observe if the Earth were to slow down, come to a dead halt and then reverse the direction of spin on its axis?

PIGS would fly. — Simon Monaghan, Jerusalem, Israel

THE CIRCULATION of the Earth's atmosphere and the weather systems that form in it are strongly influenced by the Earth's rotation. This constrains the major wind systems, such as the trade winds and the mid-latitude westerlies, to blow largely along latitude circles.

less efficient at transporting heat from the equator to the poles, so the climates of the tropics and the polar regions would become much more extreme.

I suspect that the resulting climatic chaos would put an end to all human life but, should anyone survive to witness the second half of the experiment, they would see the old atmospheric circulation patterns re-establish themselves with one crucial difference — the directions of the major wind systems would be reversed, with the trade winds blowing from the west and easterlies prevailing over Britain and Europe.

Similar changes would take place in the flow of the ocean currents and in motions within the Earth's liquid core. The latter are responsible for generating the Earth's magnetic field — as this changed there could be dramatic changes in the amount of cosmic radiation reaching the Earth's surface.

We can get some idea of the changes that might occur on a slowly-rotating Earth by studying the atmosphere of Venus, which takes 243 days to rotate about its axis. Interestingly, the Earth's rotation has slowed down significantly over geological time. The consequences of this for the evolution of life on Earth are speculated on by

John Barrow in his book The Arful Universe (Oxford, 1995). — Dr John King, Cambridge

WHIPLASH. — Brendan Quinn, Manchester

Any answers?

AT WHAT event did Queen Victoria say: "We are not amused"? — Rosalind Rusbridge, Bristol

ATA preliminary hearing of the O J Simpson trial a sealed envelope was handed to the judge. What happened to it and what did it contain? — B Stables, Rowlands Gill, Tyne and Wear

CAN anyone explain why what appear to be fleure-de-lis form part of the Bosnian flag? — Mich Connors, Illinois, USA

Answers should be e-mailed to weekly@guardian.co.uk, faxed to 0171/44171-242-0985, or posted to The Guardian Weekly, 75 Farringdon Road, London EC1M 3HQ. Notes & Queries Volume 6 is available from Fourth Estate, price £8.99

Letter from North Korea Natalie Bennett

Uniform behaviour

IT SNOWED this morning in Pyongyang, and the women who sweep the already pristine streets were out even earlier than usual, and for once with something more than a faint speck of dust to shift with their twig brooms.

Soviet Union has taken away the last of the country's European friends. Another explanation is offered by sources that suggest any unauthorised contact with a foreigner could land a local in a "re-education camp".

It is seen not in dress — the men may tend to wear dark suits, but the women and children offer splashes of colour in these grey northern climes — but in behaviour. Even here in the heart of the capital the average rate of traffic flow would not be more than one or two vehicles a minute, but everyone, absolutely everyone, disappears into the grim, dark underpasses at each corner.

Walking the streets as a foreigner of European appearance I find a similar uniformity in the reaction to my presence. A path clears before me as I walk; the street cleaners, broom pauses, the trolley bus queue contracts to make space, the department store window shoppers shrink away from me.

This morning I smiled at a young girl cradled by an obviously proud grandma, but she refused to acknowledge my overture. I nodded my thanks to the street sweeper, but she would not look up. In a total of three hours on the street, having escaped my guide, I succeeded in achieving only one response, from a group of around 40 ten-year-olds who appeared to have been temporarily abandoned by their teachers.

FROM THE three-year-olds I saw singing songs in praise of Kim Il Jong at the showcase nursery in Pyongyang, to their grandparents who survived the war, this society has known only one version of history, life and meaning. Even folk memories of great-grandparents — there must be a few who have survived — could only tell of a worse time, of more than 50 years of Japanese colonialism and oppression.

There is no alternative story to explain the past or the present. From the numerous monuments in Pyongyang, all accompanied by metre after metre of bronze statues of sturdy peasants and valiant soldiers, to the television with rapturous crowds again and again and again greeting Kim Jong Il or praising the virtues of his late father Kim Il Sung, it must be difficult to imagine any kind of alternative reality.

I had expected some curiosity and interest from the locals — after all in midwinter I am one of probably less than 20 European foreigners in a city of 2 million people, but instead the overwhelming feeling was of fear and hostility. That may have been because I could have been a hated American enemy or any enemy, since the collapse of the

A Country Diary

Stewart MacGibbon

WAITAKERE, New Zealand: It is the middle of summer and the nikau palms are in the process of flowering and fruiting, a spectacular progression which attracts the local wood pigeons. The bract which holds the nikau leaf to the bulbous swelling at the top of the stem peels back from the cluster of leaves and is eventually dragged off the plant completely by the weight of the fruit to reveal a substantial, waxy-looking, flower-bearing structure, studded with a multitude of feathery, pale-pink flowers.

It doesn't take long for the flowers to attract a number of bees which can then be seen busily working amongst them for the next few days. The pollination and fertilisation process is fairly rapid; within two weeks the flowers have been replaced by the deep-green nubbins

of the developing fruits. The warm, humid days rapidly ripen the fruits to a fiery orange-red. The local wood pigeon (Heteros in Maori) is slightly larger than its European counterpart, with a plump snow-white breast, an iridescent green back and wings and red legs and beak. These handsome birds can be heard in flight, producing a swooshing whistle as the air rushes past their light feathers, silencing as they pull into a stall and then swoop back down to the trees. Alighting on the fruit-laden nikau palms they cling acrobatically at a series of precarious angles, the better to gorge themselves, pausing every few seconds to reassemble an upright posture and review the scene. A feeding session may last for 10 minutes or more before there is a soft explosion of sound as the pigeon bursts back into the air and is rapidly lost in the richly contoured canopy of the bush.

